

Here we are again on Yom Kippur. Each of us with our own thoughts, our own hopes, our own regrets. I imagine that many of us think of Yom Kippur as a very personal day – a day for introspection, and soul searching, and private meditation. And while that is certainly true, it is not sufficient – because our Machzor teaches that Yom Kippur is also a day to be with and of the community. That is the message of our collective confession. And that, I believe, is ultimately the message and the attraction of this evening of *Kol Nidre*.

The word *Nidre* means vows. Vows are promises. Vows are spoken commitments referring to specific acts. Vows are the formalization of resolutions. Vows are the codification of good intentions. Vows are the spoken words that give expression to our deepest yearnings about who we want to become. And vows can also be the unspoken habits and patterns of behavior that shape our lives.

Vows are upheld, or annulled, by others – that is, by those who are listening. Tradition teaches that when we utter our vows of contrition and repentance out loud, and others hear them, then those who hear can play a role in our fulfillment of our vows. When we stand together for *Kol Nidre*, we annul each other's vows – we pledge to support each other in teshuva (repentance) and change. Community pressure can sometimes encourage us to maintain bad behavior and community support can help us improve.

The potential role of the community in our private resolutions is the reason that our confession of sins is in the plural/collective. *Al cheit shechatanu...* we say, For the sin that we have sinned...

Listen to our prayerbook's list of *Al Cheit's*: For the sins we have sinned through careless speech, through lies and deceit, through gossip and rumor, through judging others unfairly, through dishonesty, through insincere apologies, by losing self-control, through sexual immorality, through cynicism and scorn, through offensive speech, through arrogance, through a selfish or petty spirit...

Of course, it cannot be that each and every one of us is guilty of each and every sin, each and every year. But we confess them in the plural, in the collective for good reason. Confessing all these sins in the collective provides “cover” for those who

need it. I imagine that each of us knows how difficult and painful it is to confront our own behavior. We know how challenging it is to reflect on each of the times we uttered words we later regretted, how challenging it is to reflect on each of the times we said something cruel or unkind, how challenging it is to reflect on each of the times we stretched the truth, how challenging it is to reflect on each of the times we behaved shamefully. But the wisdom of our tradition shows us that it is much easier for each of us to acknowledge our own individual faults when we do so as part of the collective. We all recite the confession of all the sins while each of us knows in our hearts which ones apply to us this year.

A second reason that we confess our sins in the collective is that we, as a community, as a society, may well be complicit in those transgressions. After all, what is it that leads us into sin? Temptation? Greed? Materialism? Desire? Expectation? Peer Pressure? Are not these forces overly prevalent in our society? Are these not the not-so-subtle message of our entire advertising industry – that we should not be content with what we have but, rather, we should want more. Are not unkind words and hurtful speech a commonplace of the television industry? Often what passes for humor is merely insult piled on indignity. And how easily we traffic in gossip by calling it “news.” And in the political arena, civil discourse is a relic of a bygone era. Perhaps the most egregious at this season are political campaign ads that often contain personal insults, or promises that can’t possibly be kept, or blatant lies – and sometimes all three.

So we say: *Al cheit shechatanu...* We, the people, are complicit in all of this. We tolerate it. We even reward it. For example, we regularly elect politicians who lie to us, who tell us what we want to hear, and who promise what they can’t possibly deliver.

I remember in 1984 when Walter Mondale was running for President. He came to Chicago and had a private meeting with a group of rabbis. He said point blank: “The truth is that if people want all the government services to continue, and to increase, then the only way to do it will be through higher taxes.” Needless to say, his honesty did not get him elected. And then, four years later, candidate George Bush famously promised, “Read my lips, no new taxes.” So, we elected him, and instead of new

taxes we got increased fees and federal revenue enhancements. *Al cheit shechatanu...*

As a society, we need to learn to have higher expectations of ourselves and of others. We need to learn better ways to be supportive of traits we claim to value: honesty, civility, modesty. And what's true on a national level can also be true in personal relationships.

Last summer, one of my teachers at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Rabbi Dani Segal, told a story about one of his students in his High School class. His name was Yair. Yair was a difficult student. He never came to class prepared. He never had his book, or a notebook, or even a pencil. But he always had a wise crack. And he never failed to disrupt the class with his antics. The other students always laughed at Yair's comments. Dani said, "He was a troubling student, but I liked him. So, one day I had a private conversation with him and I said – you know, Yair, you don't have to be like this, you can do better, you can be better." The next day he came to class with a notebook and a pencil. For the first hour he sat quietly. Dani explained, "It was clear to me that he was using all the self-control he could muster, not to react to anything that was happening in the class. But then the other students said, Hey, Yair, don't you have anything to say?" Their expectations of how Yair would behave were stronger than Yair's ability to change. The community encouraged his disruptive behavior but was unable to support his good behavior. *Al cheit shechatanu...*

We confess in the collective because as a community we are often complicit in sinful behavior, or at least tacitly supportive of it – by having low expectations of others, by looking the other way, by indifference, by disconnecting, by not recognizing and rewarding virtuous behavior.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro, sometimes known as the Rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto, wrote in his diary: "selfishness stands between us and God. If we see others acting selfishly, we learn to act selfishly. But if someone else cares for us, and cares about us, we learn not to be selfish. If we are part of a community, our sensitive soul will learn not to be self-absorbed."

That is the message of this *Kol Nidre* eve – that our repentance depends on others, and the repentance of others depends on us. Our ability to change is contingent on the support of the community, of the society. On this *Kol Nidre* eve let us pledge to be that someone else who cares. On this *Kol Nidre* eve let us raise our expectations of ourselves even as we raise our expectations of others. On this *Kol Nidre* eve let us pledge collectively to create an environment that shuns sin and upholds virtue.

*V'al Kulam, Eloha Selichot*, For all our failures, O God of forgiveness, *S'lach Lanu, M'chal Lanu, Kaper Lanu*. forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement. AMEN.